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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001699

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/RA, DRL/IRF, DRL/PHD, DRL/CRA
RIYADH FOR MATT TUELLER
TEL AVIV FOR DCM LEBARON
TUNIS FOR NATALIE BROWN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/2014

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: (C) CATHOLIC CHURCH OPERATES FREELY, BUT
CHALLENGES REMAIN

REF: RIYADH 02725

Classified By: CDA Frank C. Urbancic, reason 1.4(d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church in Kuwait, with an estimated 100,000 members. It has its own bishop, while all the rest of Arabia comes under another bishop. Additionally, the Papal Nuncio (Vatican Ambassador) accredited to Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, and Qatar is resident in Kuwait; he is also Apostolic Delegate for the Arabian Peninsula. The Roman Catholic Church is one of four Christian churches that are officially recognized by the GOK and allowed to operate compounds officially designated as churches. It is able to hold worship services without government interference, and the GOK is generally tolerant and supportive of the Church's activities. However, like other recognized churches, it faces a quota on the number of clergy and staff it can bring into the country, chronic overcrowding at its three facilities, and restrictions on religious teaching. The Church is working with other recognized Christian denominations to strengthen fellowship and dialogue among the diverse Christian community in Kuwait, and to bring their concerns to the attention of GOK officials. The Church also provides some limited, unofficial assistance to abused third-country national domestic servants and other victims of trafficking, many of whom are Catholics. END SUMMARY.

2.(SBU) Poloffs met with Bishop Francis Micallef, the Roman Catholic Church's Vicar Apostolic of Kuwait, May 25 as part of our ongoing dialogue with leaders of the various faiths in Kuwait on religious freedom issues. Bishop Micallef, a Maltese national and a member of the Carmelite order, recently celebrated his 50th anniversary of ordination, and has been resident in Kuwait City for the past 22 years. Having reached the age of 75, Micallef has submitted his resignation as required; he said he expects to leave fairly soon, once a successor is chosen. He explained that Kuwait is a Vicariate Apostolic rather than a diocese, because a diocese has to have an indigenous Catholic community. Technically, therefore, Micallef is properly described as Catholic Bishop "in" Kuwait, not "of" Kuwait (he is Vicar Apostolic of Kuwait). The same applies to the rest of Arabia, whose Vicar Apostolic is Bishop Bernardo Gremoli (reftel), resident in UAE.

(U) LARGEST CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN KUWAIT

13. (SBU) The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church in Kuwait, with an estimated 100,000 members. Bishop Micallef declined to estimate how many of these attend services, but he noted by way of illustration that more than 20 weekly services are conducted at the Cathedral, in various languages. The Roman Catholic Church has two official churches, the Holy Family Cathedral in downtown Kuwait City built in 1960-61 as the seat of the Vicar Apostolic, and Our Lady of Arabia in Ahmadi that was built by Kuwait Oil Company in the 1950s, originally for its (mainly Indian) Catholic employees. The Roman Catholic Church also holds worship and other religious services in a private home in Salmiya district that is registered in the name of a Kuwaiti citizen. The Holy Family Cathedral and its surrounding compound was built on land in downtown Kuwait City given to the Roman Catholic Church by the ruling family. Latin (i.e. western rite, what most Americans think of when they say "Catholic"), Maronite, Coptic Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Malabar, and Malankara congregations all worship there. The estimated 2,000 Greek Catholics in Kuwait, while also under the authority of the Pope, worship separately in a rented house in Salwa district. The Greek Catholic priest is a Patriarchal Vicar subordinate to a Bishop in Lebanon.

4.(SBU) The Roman Catholic Church is one of four Christian denominations that enjoy full recognition by the GOK allowing them to operate compounds officially designated as churches; the other three are the Coptic Orthodox, Anglican, and National Evangelical (Protestant) churches. The Roman Catholic Church has an "open file" at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor that allows it to bring in pastors and

staff. However, there are quotas on the number of clergy and staff that recognized churches can bring into the country. According to Bishop Micallef, the Roman Catholic Church can sponsor and obtain residence permits for a total of 16 workers. The Church currently has 9 priests and 7 staff members.

(U) PAPAL NUNCIO RESIDENT IN KUWAIT CITY

5.(SBU) A Papal Nuncio (Vatican Ambassador) is also resident in Kuwait, accredited to Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, and Qatar. The Nuncio, Archbishop Giuseppe De Andrea, is also Apostolic Delegate for the Arabian Peninsula (i.e. he is the Vatican's diplomatic representative to all countries of the Peninsula, whether accredited or not), and has served in Kuwait for over four years. The fact that the Nuncio is resident in Kuwait is testimony to the GOK's commitment to religious tolerance. Kuwait was the first Gulf state to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1969. In 2001, diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Kuwait were upgraded to ambassadorial level.

(SBU) CHALLENGES FACING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

6.(C) Bishop Micallef stressed that the Roman Catholic Church is free to operate openly in its three premises, and that the GOK and Kuwaiti society are generally tolerant and supportive of its activities. He said that before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, some conservative members of parliament had proposed to relocate the Holy Family Cathedral from its downtown Kuwait City location near the National Assembly to a less conspicuous site, but that those demands were later dropped. A few years ago, the owner of the private home in Salmiya in which members of the Roman Catholic community hold worship services decided to sell the property. In order to avoid having to relocate, the Roman Catholic Church bought the home but a private Kuwaiti citizen agreed to register it officially and legally in her name. (Note: Foreigners are prohibited from owning property in Kuwait. End Note).

7.(C) According to Bishop Micallef, the Roman Catholic Church has asked the GOK for additional land and permission to build a multi-purpose facility in which to hold religious and other community services, such as weddings, in order to alleviate chronic overcrowding. The Roman Catholic Church has also petitioned the GOK to allow Catholic students in private schools to study the catechism during the period in which Muslim students receive mandatory instruction in Islam. The GOK has not yet responded to these requests.

8.(C) The Roman Catholic Church, according to Bishop Micallef, does not engage in any official inter-faith dialogue with Muslims in Kuwait. Unofficially, he said, government officials and Muslim scholars sometimes seek information from him on Catholicism or Church teaching, and those contacts provide a forum for some limited, unofficial inter-faith dialogue. The Roman Catholic Church holds a weekly prayer service for Christian unity, and the various Christian churches in Kuwait have revived a Christian "fellowship" program to strengthen dialogue and understanding among themselves.

(SBU) CHURCH EFFORTS TO ASSIST TIP VICTIMS

9.(SBU) Bishop Micallef highlighted the Roman Catholic Church's efforts to provide some assistance to abused or exploited domestic servants and other laborers, many thousands of whom are Catholics, mainly from India and the Philippines. He said the Church helped to encourage the Philippine Embassy several years ago to establish a shelter for runaway Philippine domestics. (Note: Out of roughly 400,000-500,000 domestic servants in Kuwait, around 1,000 are estimated to be living in source-country embassy shelters at any given time as a result of abuse, non-payment of wages, or other labor problems. End Note). Church pastors, staff, and community volunteers, he added, often visit source-country embassy shelters, police stations, and the Central Prison to donate clothing and other items to domestics there.

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